

Nuclear weapons: Humanitarian consequences

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As part of the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement (the Movement), Australian Red Cross is contributing to the renewed global effort to raise awareness of the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. In 2011 and 2013 the Movement's highest decision making body, the Council of Delegates, adopted Resolutions committing the Movement to pursue the elimination of nuclear weapons due to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences. The Movement is now a leading voice in what has become known as the 'humanitarian initiative' to achieve the elimination and prohibition of nuclear weapons.

Over the last three years there has been a series of intergovernmental conferences investigating the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. The most recent conference in Vienna was attended by 900 delegates including representatives of 158 states, the Movement, and civil society members. The UN Secretary General and Pope Francis conveyed messages of concern and support to the Conference. In addition to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies had over 30 National Societies and 42 delegates represented at the Conference.

The Chair's summary of the Vienna conference concluded many of the things we inherently know about nuclear weapons: that the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons detonation are immediate, long-term and not constrained by borders; any affects are possibly irreversible; and that no organisation has the capacity to respond adequately to a nuclear emergency. But there was also new evidence presented that shows that the long-term health effects disproportionately affects women and children, and that the present day risk of the use of nuclear weapons, or accidental detonation, is much higher than previously thought.

As a result of the evidence that has emerged in Vienna and the two previous conferences, the international community

has a clearer grasp of the risk that nuclear weapons might be used or accidentally detonated and the devastating effects such an event would have with regard to global health, environmental destruction and food security.

The Austrian Government is now calling for states to pledge to fill the 'legal gap' in regards to nuclear weapons. Currently there is no legal norm universally prohibiting nuclear weapons, even though other weapons that cause unnecessary suffering, such as chemical weapons and landmines, are banned under international humanitarian law (IHL). It is the strong view of the Movement that it is difficult to ever envisage a situation where the use of nuclear weapons could be consistent with the IHL law principles of distinction, proportionality, unnecessary suffering, and protections for the natural environment.

In February 2015, President of the ICRC Mr Peter Maurer delivered a speech to the diplomatic community in Geneva, expressing the concerns of ICRC about nuclear weapons, in light of new evidence presented at the three intergovernmental conferences. Australian Red Cross agrees with the President that the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons has now become a humanitarian imperative and called on states to establish a time-bound framework to negotiate a legally binding agreement prohibiting nuclear weapons.

Australia has long supported the idea of a world without nuclear weapons. This year is the 70th Anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and this anniversary, along with the extraordinary momentum that has been building with regard to the humanitarian initiative, provides an opportunity to move towards a world free of these most dangerous weapons of mass destruction.

*For further information regarding the work of Australian Red Cross towards the elimination of nuclear weapons, please contact **Mr Tom Neilson** (tneilson@redcross.org.au), International Humanitarian Law Officer for the Northern Territory.*